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## **The Footprints of Religious Enthusiasm**

### **Great Memorials and Faint Vestiges of Belgium's Marian Apparition Mania of the 1930s**

Chris Maunder, York St. John University, U.K.

#### **Abstract**

This article looks at the original context, development and survival of the shrines and cults from the year, 1933, and country, Belgium, in which there were more reported apparitions of Mary than at any other time and place in 20<sup>th</sup> century Catholic Europe. The investigation results in three categories of Belgian apparition locations from the 1930s as they are to be found eighty years later in 2013: (i) well-visited, internationally-known shrines approved by the Church; (ii) smaller shrines where devotion has persisted despite Church skepticism; (iii) sites where only faint vestiges remain although there is some local memory of the events.

#### **Introduction**

The sites of reported apparitions of Mary in the Roman Catholic tradition are marked by great shrines: in particular, Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Fatima. While apparitions occur in many traditions and may be everyday occurrences (Green and McCreery), in Roman Catholicism there are certain times and places where Marian phenomena are taken more seriously, and belief and devotion take on a communal, regional, national, or international dimension. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, surveys of Marian apparitions (e.g., Laurentin and Sbalchiero; Hierzenberger and Nedomansky) show that no period of intensity in a single nation matches that of Belgium in 1933. Reports of visions spread dramatically across the country in that year in both its French-speaking (Walloon) and Dutch-speaking (Flemish) regions. Apparitions then continued more sporadically for a few more years, but Belgium

never again experienced such an outbreak. This article explores the history of Belgian visionary cults in the 1930s and shows what remains today of this outburst of enthusiasm for visions, which must have seemed at the time to augur a new age.

In an overview of Belgian Marian geography, Beauraing and Banneux – both in French-speaking Wallonia – stand out, alongside medieval and early modern shrines. These were approved by the Roman Catholic hierarchy in 1949 after much debate and considerable disagreement. Beauraing, where visions began on November 29, 1932, and continued until January 3, 1933, was the first in a series of new apparition sites in Belgium; the second series in Banneux was from January 15 to March 2, 1933. Beauraing and Banneux continue to draw numbers of pilgrims from Belgium and abroad, and are among a small elite group of 20<sup>th</sup> century apparition shrines that have received full Vatican approval. However, a more extensive investigation uncovers Onkerzele in the Flemish Ardennes, a less prominent Marian apparition shrine from the 1930s that has survived. It is known to local Catholics with some supporters from further afield. The existence of many other apparition locations from this period can only be discerned through historical accounts, oral traditions, and/or modest local memorials.

### **Beauraing: The Original 1930s Shrine**

Catholic experiences of visionary phenomena have been understood as confirmation of the belief that God is ultimately in control of events and that human history relates to a divine purpose. This is particularly important when devotees feel powerless in the face of prevalent social trends. Zimdars-Swartz outlines the main themes of major modern Marian apparitions:

Mary appears to a member of a community that is suffering or whose existence is threatened; she explains or clarifies what lies behind the suffering or threat; and she recommends a remedy. More often than not the problem is identified as the sin of the community, defined in terms of ritual transgressions . . . The remedy of the Virgin is also, typically, a kind of ritual: the establishment of a new shrine, the rebuilding of an old one, or the promotion of a particular devotional practice or exercise (8).

This analysis suggests that the greater the collective perception of suffering or threat, the more likely that the apparition will gain a large following. The very large number of apparitions in Belgium in 1933 reflects a communal angst as is described by Zimdars-Swartz's model. In this period, it is clear that the interest in apparitions was related to political and economic uncertainty (van Osselaer 2012: 2).

The first Belgian apparition of 1932-33, on November 29, 1932, occurred in the small Walloon market town of Beauraing, a short distance from the French border, about 15 km from Dinant and the River Meuse (see Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 120-23, for a summary; Toussaint and Joset for a detailed Catholic account). Yet there is nothing in the account of the Beauraing apparitions that refers to, in Zimdars-Swartz's words, "suffering or threat," at least not in the received tradition of visionary messages which was established at the shrine. The messages followed traditional patterns for children's visions: requests for the building of a chapel and pilgrimage; exhortations to "be good," to make sacrifices, and to pray a great

deal; promises to convert sinners; identifications of the vision using Mariological formulae: “I am the Immaculate Virgin,” “I am the Mother of God, Queen of Heaven” (Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 121). Thus the uncertainties and anxieties of the context cannot be related explicitly to the content of the visions but perhaps, implicitly, to an underlying need for consolation on the part of the children and, certainly, to the mass public *response* to their experiences.

A dialogic model for visionary phenomena, as compared to seeing the seers as a one-way medium for divine initiatives, is the most accurate one. The community plays its part in the construction of the story (see Zimdars-Swartz: 12-17). The Virgin Mary at Beauraing said that she was “the Immaculate Virgin” only after a question using this epithet had been put to her via the visionaries. Derselle, a Catholic who challenged the authenticity of the visions, points out that the messages were solicited by questions and that clarity was lacking in the earliest accounts of the visions (25-26). Most visions could be subject to such objections. The Namur commission of 1942, when the diocese pressed for authentication, drew on the homogeneity of the messages as a whole to counter such objections (Charue). It would have been reasonable for Derselle to respond that homogeneity emerges from the work of visionaries, devotees, editors, and supportive theologians as the believing community moves toward harmonizing aspects of the original outburst of enthusiasm, which included elements of chaos and confusion. Based on that rationale, Derselle would then have had to condemn all apparitions in principle; the Catholic Church, however, accepts a small number of apparitions as genuine encounters with the divine.

If there were contextual triggers for the popularity of visions in Belgium in this period, then why did the Belgian apparition phenomena start in Beauraing? An answer to this is inevitably speculative and can be derived from associated events and circumstances. In 1914, German armies rapidly conquered Belgium before meeting the Allied French-British forces along a line roughly following the French-Belgian border in an early World War I conflict known as the Battle of the Frontiers. The battle line was drawn along the Meuse and Sambre Rivers. Belgian resistance in general was not effective. Isolated harrying of German troops led to the suffering of atrocities by men, women, and children in some towns, most notably Leuven/Louvain and Dinant, which is Beauraing’s larger neighbor from where many pilgrims came in 1932/3 (Lipkes). Anti-Catholicism constituted a major factor in the treatment of Belgians by the German army (Lipke: Afterword). By the end of the first month of the war, August 1914, the battle line moved west into France where it remained for most of the war; Belgium remained under German occupation until November 1918.

After World War I, the Catholic Church in Wallonia experienced anticlericalism and universal suffrage gave impetus to left wing parties in that region. Socialists were more popular than the Catholic party and there was growing support for Communists (Genicot: 424; van Osselaer 2009: 381). The Church responded with a missionary effort against “dechristianization” (Delfosse: 245; see van Osselaer 2009: 392, for the role of Catholic Action), since Belgium was now an appropriate setting for the perennial apparition concern for the conversion of “sinners.” Adding to the general atmosphere of European pessimism in 1932 were the effects of the Great Depression following the Wall Street crash of 1929 and Hitler’s rise to power after three elections, which established the National Socialists as the largest party in Germany. Apparitions in Beauraing began in the same month as the second

of these elections (November 6, 1932). Although this election was not as successful for the Nazis as that held the previous July, it was not long before Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor, January 30, 1933, and the Nazis gained strength in a third election on March 5, after which opposition was progressively silenced. In these circumstances – economic uncertainty, fear of aggression, declining faith commitment – it is reasonable to suggest that the Roman Catholic community in Wallonia would have been sensitive to the need for divine intervention and consolation. Devotional accounts agree that it was a traumatic time during which one *would* expect the Virgin Mary to comfort the faithful. In relating crisis to apparition or vision, devotees and sociologists concur, but for different reasons.

The Beauraing visionaries were five children (aged nine to fifteen) from two families, Degeimbre and Voisin. According to their testimonies, a shining young woman, her feet hidden by a small cloud and golden rays around her head, hovered above a railway bridge. She appeared as they passed a Lourdes grotto in the grounds of a convent. After more visions over the next few days, the figure moved closer, among the branches of a hawthorn bush. The eldest girl saw a golden heart upon her chest, causing supporters to locate Beauraing within the tradition of devotion to Mary's Immaculate Heart. There was also a phenomenon of a ball of light, apparently visible to several onlookers. The apparitions (thirty-three in number) ceased on January 3, 1933, the crowd now approaching 30,000 (Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 120-23). Thurston records how pilgrimage to Beauraing attained an estimated 1.7 million between November 1932 and September 1933, nearly twice the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes during that time (1).

Apparitions occur in an unfolding meta-narrative of Catholic devotion, in which certain themes evolve and prominent cases form templates. Beauraing's visions owe something to the precedent of Lourdes since they took place next to a Lourdes grotto and, like Lourdes, they share the reference to the Immaculate Conception and the request for a chapel. The vision of the heart is often said to be a confirmation of the Fatima messages, but this is unlikely to have been consciously realized by the visionaries at the time. The parallels are not particularly strong. The Immaculate Heart was an established devotion (Boss); the Fatima revelations of the 1920s were not well known across Europe in the 1930s. The first Namur commission in 1935-36 denied that the visionaries had been given a leaflet on Fatima (Joset 1984: 39-75).

### **Banneux: The Healing Spring**

Even more Lourdes-like were the apparitions at Banneux in the hills near Liège, where an eleven year old, Mariette Beco, experienced visions between January 15 and March 2, 1933, with far fewer witnesses than those at Beauraing (Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 111-15; see Rutten for a detailed account). Banneux was a remote hamlet (although the famous racing circuit at Spa, built in 1921, is only 20 km away). Mariette reported a lady in a white robe and blue sash who prompted her to pray and helped her find a healing spring, all details that echo Lourdes. Just as December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, was a key date at Beauraing during the visions, February 11, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, had a similar impact at Banneux.

Like the Beauraing case, Banneux's visions centered upon the presence of the Virgin and her relationship with the visionary who stood as an intermediary for other faithful

people. Above all, the Virgin Mary wanted frequent prayer. The figure referred to herself as the “Virgin of the Poor,” and later, “the Mother of Savior, Mother of God.” A final message was not dissimilar to that at Beauraing two months earlier – indeed, Mariette was accused of mimicking Beauraing (Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 112).

There was much emphasis on healing and the relief of suffering at Banneux; therefore, the messages align more closely than Beauraing’s with Zimdar-Swartz’s paradigm in which suffering or threat is included in the content of visions, although the suffering seems to have been understood by Mariette as poor health rather than the effects of social, political, and economic circumstances. Nevertheless, she perceived an international dimension: the spring was “reserved for all nations . . . to heal the sick.” This is a good example of “alternative history.” Only a short distance away from Banneux lies the German border, and across it in 1933 a newly-installed Nazi government was beginning to make plans that would engulf many nations in total war. Although one cannot be certain that an eleven year old could grasp the ramifications of the current political situation, she did grow up in amidst intense concern about the international situation, particularly acute since the onset of the Depression. In this context, the Virgin Mary was believed by devotees to have created a shrine “for all nations” that would outlast the War and mark her healing presence through the coming decades. This was emphasized by the first famous healing, that of a man, supposedly an anarchist, who walked from Barcelona to Banneux in the summer of 1933 (Thurston: 38-40). In the eyes of supporters, the twin fruits expected of a Marian apparition – healing and conversion – were realized.

With the end of the visions at Banneux, the official, sanctioned Catholic history of apparitions in Belgium comes to a close on March 2, 1933. There were positive signs from the dioceses in their responses to these visions from an early stage. Parish priests took an interest by interviewing the visionaries and were gradually won over. As early as December 1932, the Bishop of Namur, Mgr. van Heylen, forbade clergy to attend among the growing crowds at Beauraing, but soon afterwards admitted that he was happy to see Marian piety developing in the diocese. He visited the shrine in June 1933 and sanctioned the building of a chapel (Joset 1981: 17-42; Servais: 57-61). At Banneux, Mgr. Kerkhofs, Bishop of Liège, authorized the building of a chapel in May 1933 and, by the end of 1934, argued for the authenticity of the apparitions (Beyer: 203-14).

### **Controversy Over Beauraing and Banneux**

Arguments within the Catholic community began to rage in early 1933 over the credibility of the Beauraing apparitions. As a criterion for diocesan commissions, strong Catholic disagreement is decidedly a negative one. Firstly, a certain Dr. Maistriaux supported the apparitions of the children and attempted to give them medical backing; he was the first to put in writing the accounts of the phenomena. As the visionary Gilberte Degeimbre recalls, the children at Beauraing were plagued by doctors. At Lourdes and elsewhere, the medical profession took a great interest in the phenomena and tested the trance states by inflicting pain and taking lack of response as a positive sign. Psychologists were present at Beauraing, too. The Leuven/Louvain University investigator, Dr. van Gehuchten, thought that the agreement between the children was caused by “unconscious simulation” complicated by “auto-suggestion”; like his colleague, Dr. de Greeff (who remarked on the

“inanity” of the phenomenon), he did not think they were guilty of fraud but deceived by psychological factors (van Gehuchten: 24-30; de Greeff: 173-74).

These psychologists teamed with a Carmelite, Bruno de Jésus-Marie, in publishing *Les Faits Mystérieux de Beauraing: Études, Documents, Réponses* (de Jésus-Marie et al.) a volume of the *Études Carmelitaines*, the publication through which Belgian Carmelites expressed opposition to Beauraing. De Jésus-Marie was quite accurate in arguing that the Carmelite mystical tradition, in particular the writings of the 16<sup>th</sup> century saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, recommended skepticism with respect to popular visions which claimed objectivity on the basis of an apparently realistic image. This heritage is often used to urge caution about new visionary claims. The Carmelite mystics also expressed concern about the possibility of demonic influence in religious phenomena. Drawing on this, Derselle’s publication *Et si c’était le diable?* represented strong Catholic opposition to the apparitions on the basis that the problematic aspects – as he identified them – could suggest that a diabolical origin was more likely than a divine one. Derselle developed his thesis by claiming that a local spiritualist in Beauraing had inspired the visions (58-61), something countered by the first Namur commission in 1935-36 (Joset 1984: 39-75). De Greeff felt, on the other hand, with much stronger justification, that the crowd had influenced the visionaries (87-88).

It is not unusual for the intensity of interest in apparition phenomena to inspire new visions among the pilgrims. Children are displaced by adults, whose social knowledge seems to provide them with a greater motivation to unveil the secrets of the future. Thus an apparition site evolves sometimes in ways that do not help the cause for the original apparitions. Beauraing saw a renewal of apparitions in June 1933, this time to a 58 year old security guard named Tilman Côme, a pilgrim from Pontauray near Mettet, about 30 km away, who claimed to have been healed of spondylitis and osteitis at Beauraing (van den Steen: 22-36; Toussaint and Joset: 115-19). Thurston comments how healing miracles – despite being prayed for – were not common during the children’s visions, but, along with conversions, became more prevalent during the middle months of 1933 (11, 25). The few words of simple devotion that characterized the children’s apparitions at Beauraing and Banneux contrast with Côme’s conversations with the Virgin: “I [Mary] have come for the glory of Belgium and to preserve this land from the invader. Hurry up!” People understood this to refer to Nazi Germany, although Côme is reported to have interpreted it as meaning the influx of enterprise as Beauraing became a center of pilgrimage (van den Steen: 29).

Côme maintained that Mary had come to bring grace to the afflicted and to the visionaries, including himself. Several elements were familiar in the apparition tradition: the importance of prayer that would soon be answered; the request for a chapel; the conversion of sinners; a “secret.” He seems to have misspelled Beauraing: “Notre-Dame de Bôring”! Some other messages were seen to be incoherent. Côme’s lack of sophistication came through in his account and this led to ecclesiastical disfavor. He was unorthodox in naming August 5 as “my [i.e. Mary’s] feast day” and asking for a great pilgrimage on that date. It was assumed that he had confused this date with the Feast of the Assumption, August 15, as the 5<sup>th</sup> was a little-known feast of Our Lady of the Snows. But Côme held firm, and an estimated 150,000 attended on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Côme had a vision of his desired chapel and its interior, but some thought it looked like the church at Mettet. Disillusionment with his testimony grew and contrasts with the children’s testimony were made, especially by clergy. However, Côme,

despite never being regarded as one of the authentic visionaries of Beauraing by the main body of pilgrims, retained his supporters, including Pierre Burnon, who published a booklet entitled *Le Vrai Visage de Tilman Côme*. A few followers, “Cômistes,” continued to go to Beauraing on pilgrimage on August 5th for many years afterwards (van den Steen).

While Catholic scholars debated theological and psychological factors, popular support continued unabated. Publications supported the new shrines and disseminated information about them. For Beauraing, this was *L'Officiel de Beauraing*, produced by the “Pro Maria” movement in French and Flemish; for Banneux, it was *Tancrémont-Banneux* (Tancrémont is an older shrine with a miraculous cross about 2 km from Banneux). Then *Les Annales de Beauraing et Banneux* published material on both shrines from 1933 to 1940 (Toussaint and Joset: 121, 216). By the summer of 1933, pilgrims from across Europe were arriving at both sites (Thurston: 38-40). Banneux’s emphasis on “all nations” led to the founding of the “International Union of Prayers” by the German Catholic welfare society, “Caritas.” Banneux became more international in focus than Beauraing (Kerkhofs: 168-79), an emphasis that has continued until today.

Another source of support for the apparitions, particularly at Beauraing, was the fact that they were promoted by the Belgian “Rex” (Christ the King) movement, which had arisen from the “Action Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge,” part of the European-wide “Catholic Action” movement (see van Osselaer 2009). Starting with Dr. Maistriaux, a local president of the movement, their *Éditions Rex* supported the Beauraing apparitions, including those of Tilman Côme. While important for the promulgation of the Beauraing shrine in its early period, this association eventually became less helpful for the shrine’s reputation among Catholics. Despite the apolitical principles of Catholic Action, the leader of the movement, Leon Degrelle, took the Rexists in a fascist direction and they stood against the Catholic Party (van Osselaer 2009: 383). They were denounced by the Catholic Church in 1937 for electoral misconduct (Genicot: 427-28; Delfosse: 244), the same year the Pope spoke against German Nazis for their anti-Catholic policies in *Mit Brennender Sorge*. While he was anti-Nazi at first, in keeping with Belgian anti-German nationalism, Degrelle became a collaborator during the Second World War and was consequently disgraced. Nevertheless, Beauraing survived and outgrew its connections to the Rex movement.

### Apparitions in Flanders

Beauraing and Banneux are situated in the French-speaking Walloon southern half of Belgium, but the proliferation of apparitions later in 1933 belongs mainly to the Flemish-speaking north. They began on August 4, in a small town called Onkerzele on a hillside near Geraardsbergen. Once again, as is common in this period, Lourdes played its part in the origin of the apparitions, as they took place at a Lourdes grotto below a small chapel next to the parish church wall. The visionary was Léonie van den Dijck, who had been on pilgrimage to Beauraing in June; one of her first messages referred to the “Virgin of the Poor,” a clear borrowing from Banneux, something which would not have helped her cause. Léonie’s visions also referred to the tradition of Mary being unable to hold back the arm of her Son in judgment (a medieval theme repeated at La Salette in 1846); this was caused by the sins and blasphemies of humanity for which prayer, conversion, and penitence were necessary. Léonie’s messages echoed themes in popular Catholicism that are not popular with the

hierarchy: the tradition of warning of future catastrophe is more common in the modern apparition tradition than the gentle healing spirituality of Lourdes and Banneux. “Chastisements” were threatened and Léonie’s “country” was in great danger, but Mary would protect it. The vision asked for an enlargement of the chapel and a new small shrine at the place of the apparitions dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows, where people could come on pilgrimage, especially on the feast day (September 15). The image of the sorrowful Mary was therefore paramount. There were also references to the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Schellink: 73-77; Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 683).

While the main period of apparitions lasted only until October, there was an occurrence that echoed Fatima with a “miracle of the sun” on December 18: a second solar disc that spun and vibrated while resplendent with a variety of colors (Jacobs: 13-16). While the Fatima story was not widely known outside Portugal and Spain until the 1940s, there was nevertheless some knowledge of it (e.g., in Germany, Scheer: 79-91), and the miracle of the sun was probably the most famous feature, having been covered in Portuguese newspapers in 1917. Prophetic visions continued over the years, although not apparitions of Mary, which were confined to 1933; later, Léonie had visions of the Sacred Head of Christ (Schellink: 135-38). Her prophecies apparently included foretelling of the deaths of the Belgian king and queen in 1934 and 1935. It was claimed, according to the testimony of a supporter, Gustaaf Schellink, that Léonie predicted the coming of the Second World War and denounced Hitler, which alienated some of her devotees and upset some German pilgrims (Jacobs: 18-22). In this account, she also foresaw details of destructive battles in Belgium and deportations to concentration camps. The War, as in the revelations of Lucia dos Santos, would be a punishment for sin; however, at the end of the War, Léonie foresaw even greater chastisements for humanity to come.

Léonie functioned as a popular prophet in a European tradition of adult female visionaries, outside the convent and not recognized by the Church. Such personalities have not fared well in the modern history of canonical apparition cults in the Roman Catholic Church. From 1940 until her death in 1949, Léonie was also a stigmatic (Jacobs: 23-27), following Therese Neumann in Bavaria, whose stigmata and redemptive sufferings had become famous in the 1920s. Therese sent letters of support to Léonie (Schellink: 212-13); Onkerzele’s devotees made much of the link to Neumann, whose reputation, despite official Church disapproval, made her popular across Catholic Europe. Therese provides a strong example of the Catholic archetype of female spiritual giftedness often disliked by the hierarchy: she was known as a popular lay prophet and spiritually sensitive adult woman who received many visitors at her home (rather than an established shrine or religious house). Michael O’Sullivan notes that Therese is not necessarily an example of radical Catholicism; she and her supporters did not seek confrontation with the Church. As an apparently influential female, she was not critical of Catholic gender hierarchy and remained dependent on men – her priest, father, and brother – for the means of maintaining her work (O’Sullivan: 12-14). Léonie stands in the tradition of female lay prophets and stigmatics that Therese represents. She sought cooperation with the local priest who was initially supportive; only the Church at a higher level refused her claims. As the mother of nine children who had been abandoned by her husband, unlike the celibate Therese, she needed the help of male supporters, notably Gustaaf Schellinck, whose memoirs are important in



preserving her life story. Her home in Onkerzele became a shrine and, today, is a museum, as is Therese's home in Konnersreuth, Bavaria.

### **The Outbreak of Apparitions**

Other apparition cases were reported in Flemish towns, such as Herzele, Etikhove, Wielsbeke, Naastveld, a suburb of Lokeren, Olsene, Uitkerke, and Berchem and Wilrijk, suburbs of Antwerp. Onkerzele seems to have functioned as an inspiration and center for these, as visionaries appeared at Onkerzele from other neighborhoods: Jules de Vuyst (Herzele), Berthonia Holtkamp (Lokeren and Berchem), and Henri Kempanaers (Lokeren and Wilrijk) (van Osselaer 2012: 144). Walloon visions continued at Tubize, Melen, Houlteau, the older pilgrimage site at Foy Notre-Dame and Verviers. All these cases began in 1933. In 1934, the continuation of apparition enthusiasm threatened public order at times, especially at Lokeren-Naastveld, where new visionaries emerged; pilgrims came in conflict with local people and predictions of miraculous cures were not realized (van Osselaer 2010: 1177-79). The ensuing disorder caused the senior churchman in Belgium, Cardinal van Roey, Archbishop of Mechelen/Malines and Brussels, to make a statement on August 25, 1934, in partnership with the Bishop of Ghent. He dismissed the claims at Lokeren-Naastveld and advised Catholics to stay away (Bouflet and Boutry: 249-50; van Osselaer 2010: 1177). Nevertheless, some Catholic journalists were keen to show that apparitions were not out of keeping with modern times. They continued to support the visions in defiance of the Church and in opposition to fellow Catholic writers and the liberal and socialist press. The interest in the media from all sides helped to keep the apparitions in the public eye (van Osselaer 2010).

The fact that some influential visionaries were male adults ran counter to the apparent dominance of female visionaries in modern Roman Catholicism. Males gained supporters in contradiction to the usual assumption that visionary experiences should be "feminine" and, therefore, appropriate for women of all ages and boys. Tine van Osselaer (2012) writes about the masculinity of Tilman Côme at Beauraing and visionaries at Herzele, Lokeren, Olsene, and Etikhove. These male visionaries managed to combine the emotion and expressive piety associated with seers in general with the calm rationality that was expected of men. More important than gender was the simplicity of the seer. Just as the Beauraing and Banneux visionaries (and others in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) impressed people because their experience could not have been contrived from theological learning, this was also true for the working-class male seers in Belgium; a factory background was an argument in favor of the seer's authenticity. This was a period when the ideal of the Christian worker was being promulgated in Catholic Europe, with a special emphasis on those converted from anarchism or socialism (van Osselaer 2012: 154-58). However, after 1933, other males enjoyed less popular success than Tilman Côme and their visionary status did not endure.

Dirk de Merlier, local historian at Etikhove, gives an account of the apparitions in the village based on eye-witness reports (see also Hierzenberger and Nedomansky: 294; Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 305). Omer Eneman, also known as Merke Kessye, a decorator, claimed to see the Virgin Mary in the garden of a local house on October 9, 1933. She wore blue and asked him to read prayers at the spot for nine days (a novena). The messages continued with familiar themes: entreaties for people to go to confession and communion; calls for conversion; promises to comfort the sick. An interesting departure from apparition

tradition was a message that called on people to “read more” (one possible precedent is Fatima, where the girl visionary was told to learn to read). One witness claimed that most of the devotees travelled to Etikhove and were not residents of the village. On October 30, Omer was joined by a Walloon from Ronse, Maurice van Reckegem, whom he welcomed as a partner visionary. They had visions together until a huge crowd gathered. De Merlier states that the Belgian railways put on eight pilgrim trains and there was an estimate of 25,000 gathered on October 29, a date foretold by Omer as heralding a mass apparition. Many disabled people attended. However, there was no miracle and no general visual phenomenon; after November 1, the crowds disappeared and the newspapers lost interest. Omer seems to have suffered depression after this.

De Merlier’s eye-witness accounts capture the excitement, chaos, and general interest in apparitions of the time, including medical investigators in attendance. These elements of the descriptions do not suggest Etikhove as any less worthy of belief than Beauraing or Banneux. But Etikhove will have failed the test of time for several reasons: the visions followed others in Belgium and they are certainly not original; the visionaries were not children; Etikhove had neither a symbolic center to the site – which Beauraing’s hawthorn and Banneux’s spring certainly were – nor a devotional focus in the same way as Onkerzele’s Our Lady of Sorrows; the men were working class and unsophisticated like Tilman Côme; like him, they built up excitement for a specified date on which there was disappointment.

Dictionaries and lists of apparitions list fifteen cases in Belgium in 1933 (Bouflet and Boutry; Hierzenberger and Nedomansky; Laurentin and Sbalchiero; Tierney; and Miracle Hunter), and none for the rest of the 1930s except at Ham-sur-Sambre (beginning in 1936). Yet van Osselaer reproduces a map of the time identifying thirty-two apparition sites for the period 1932-35 (2012: 131). Even the large number in the major sources does not do justice to the prevalence of apparitions in Belgium during that period.

In this environment, the Church hierarchy felt called to act. Clergy were forbidden to organize pilgrimages or publicly support the apparitions, although some sent letters of private support for the apparitions to bishops (van Osselaer 2012: 156). An interdiocesan commission was set up in 1933 and continued its work into 1934 (Joset 1981: 33-34; Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 121). It is clear that, by this time, the bishops of Namur and Liège were supportive of the claims at Beauraing and Banneux, but progress towards approval was halted: both by national ecclesiastical control over the first diocesan commissions and also by the Holy Office of the Vatican, which was suspicious of the number of apparitions occurring (Beyer: 219; Joset 1981: 35-36).

1933 is known as the year of apparitions in Belgium, yet this did not see the end of new cults. In 1936 in Ham-sur-Sambre, a small town in the Walloon region between Charleroi and Namur, an adult woman claimed to see the Virgin Mary in a tunnel that carried a spring under a road next to the site of a row of stations of the cross. An eleven year old girl also reported visions there. The Church rejected these as it had all those apart from Beauraing and Banneux, but the following at Ham was persistent and processions to the shrine continued through the War and into the 1950s. Bishops of Namur announced prohibitions on the cult in 1938, 1942, 1943, 1946 – the same period during which they promoted Beauraing – and again in 1958 (Bouflet and Boutry: 294-96). The Ham apparitions were so

famous that Cardinal Ottaviani, the Prefect of the Holy Office in Rome, included them in a list of disobedient visionary movements in a statement published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 4, 1953, entitled *Christians, Don't Get Excited So Quickly!* Ottaviani pointed out that religious sentiment is subject to “deviations” and “must be guided by the reason, nourished by grace, and governed by the Church.”

### The Official Approval of Beauraing and Banneux

In the cases of Beauraing and Banneux, the supportive bishops of Namur and Liège refused to be dissuaded by controversy and the uncertainty of the national hierarchy and the Vatican. They were encouraged by the fact that there was plenty of Catholic and Catholic press support for these apparitions, although doubts were expressed about other influential visionaries like Léonie van den Dijck and Tilman Côme (Thurston: xii-xiv, 30-31). However, the bishops were obstructed by their own diocesan commissions in Namur (1935-36) and Liège (1935-37), whose members felt unable to come to a definite decision (Joset 1984: 39-75). The character of Mariette Beco and the subjectivity of the priest were called into question at Liège (Beyer: 215-25). The national commission of 1935-38 expressed its doubts about the concordance and sincerity of the witnesses and referred to the discord that Beauraing had provoked (Joset 1984: 76-84), while not discussing Banneux extensively (Beyer: 224). However, there seems to have been a sea change for Beauraing and Banneux with the coming of the Second World War; both shrines functioned as places of pilgrimage during the German occupation. In 1940, van Heylen, Bishop of Namur, announced to pilgrims that he “daily invoked Our Lady of Beauraing” and, in 1941, he agreed that four thousand people could gather there to pray for peace (Joset 1981: 37-41). Shortly afterwards, van Heylen died after 42 years as Bishop of Namur and was succeeded by Mgr. Charue who, after initial hesitation, continued the cause of Beauraing (Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 122). Kerkhofs, Bishop of Liège, authorized the cult of the Virgin of the Poor of Banneux on January 2, 1942. Then Cardinal van Roey made a new statement on March 25, 1942 (Boufflet and Boutry: 251-53), in which he allowed the local dioceses to re-open commissions on Beauraing and Banneux. However, he declared that the Onkerzele and Lokeren-Naastveld visions lacked the characteristics of the supernatural; Etikhove, Olsene, and Tubize presented no element that would support a case; all others were not worthy of attention.

Given the clear support for the original two shrines, new diocesan commissions, Namur 1942 and Liège 1942-44, were set up and Charue now felt enabled to authorize the cult of Beauraing on February 19, 1943. However, Kerkhofs was stymied by his own commission, some of whom thought that Mariette Beco was prone to hysteria, others that she had deliberately copied Lourdes (Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 114). So he employed a sympathetic priest, René Rutten, to undertake an exhaustive study (which was finally published in Rutten) and simply overruled the doubters. Charue in Namur also felt he had to answer doubts – in this case about the one male child visionary of Beauraing, Albert Voisin – by setting up an enquiry into his character. These final investigations gave the bishops justification for formally approving the apparitions in 1949 (on Marian feast days as they stood in the liturgical calendar then: Beauraing on July 2, Visitation, and Banneux on August 22, Immaculate Heart).

The Catholic community values apparitions that portray the values of successful art: originality; resonant symbolism; aesthetic impact. The simplicity and devotional orthodoxy of the Beauraing and Banneux visions finally allowed them to take their place in the canon; they displayed aspects of non-controversial originality despite the obvious – but inevitable – references to Lourdes.

Beauraing and Banneux are today well-established shrines with steady groups of pilgrims from Belgium, other parts of Europe, and further afield. Beauraing has developed local pilgrimage routes for walkers through the Ardennes countryside. Banneux, with greater space in the rural woodlands, is the larger of the two and has developed its international network more extensively, with small shrines linked to various countries as far away as Vietnam. There is a memorial to 1950s German chancellor and Catholic Konrad Adenauer, as a testimony to his work for peace in post-war Europe. A chapel dedicated to St. Michael is a copy of one in Rhöndorf, Adenauer's natal village near Köln/Cologne, which had a reputation during the War for people coming to pray for prisoners of war of all nations, and it was opened by Adenauer's son, a priest, in 1960. In this way, Banneux has stayed true to Mariette Beco's testimony that the Virgin wanted the spring "reserved for all nations." Banneux's location, so close to the borders with Germany and the Netherlands, lends itself to this symbolic vocation.

### **The Popular Survival of Onkerzele**

Only one other shrine has survived as a place of pilgrimage, that at Onkerzele. Léonie Van den Dijck's main legacy there was to restore a 17<sup>th</sup> century procession to Our Lady of Sorrows, which followed stations through the town. Of the seven stations, only one remained, but Léonie raised money for their reconstruction; by the time of her death in 1949, four stations stood and, by 1970, all seven (Schellink: 127-28). Her best-known prophecy was that her body would be exhumed and found incorrupt with the stigmata still visible. According to supporters, who provide photographs and doctors' reports in evidence, this was found to be the case in exhumations in 1972 and 1982.

Onkerzele is an example of how the persistence of "popular religion" (as categorized in Vrijhof and Waardenburg) or "popular faith," the terminology used by Badone, causes the official Roman Catholic hierarchy to moderate its original position (see Margry, who explores this in relation to the apparitions in Amsterdam). With respect to Onkerzele, the 1942 statement by Cardinal van Roey was not the end of the matter: "The events lack any supernatural characteristic . . . consequently, all activities of the cult that proceed from these events or having any relation to them will be regarded as prohibited" (Laurentin and Sbalchiero: 683, my translation). Contemporary devotees do not regard this as a final statement, and while acknowledging the Church's reluctance to approve the apparitions, they argue that the inauthenticity of Onkerzele was never finally established in the Church. Therefore, the memory of Léonie and her visions continues. The stations of the Seven Sorrows of Mary are still the focus of a procession on the first Saturday of the month, which proceeds from the grotto chapel round the seven stations and back to Léonie's grave in the churchyard. The curators of the museum that has been opened in Léonie's old house describe how the Church has relaxed its position in stages from the 1990s: the Onkerzele

parish priest began to allow Mass to be said by priests visiting with pilgrims; subsequently, he provided Mass himself to coincide with the first Saturday procession.

The fact that the pilgrims sing a hymn to “Our Lady of Flanders” gives a clue as to the persistence of Onkerzele in the face of the decline of all Belgian 1930s shrines except for Beauraing and Banneux. The two approved shrines are in French-speaking Wallonia, and so Dutch-speaking Flanders has no modern apparition shrine. The most famous medieval and early modern Marian shrines in Belgium are in the Flemish-speaking regions (Scherpenheuvel/Montaigu), the French-speaking regions (Walcourt), and close to the border (Hal/Halle). This symmetry is not continued in the approved modern apparition shrines.

### **Vestiges of Other Apparitions**

Other 1930s shrines were either suppressed or neglected. They are indicated by the faintest vestiges and memories; it takes an effort to locate the sites. After eighty years, only a few people remember them as personal experiences. Some local people have inherited memories of the mass gatherings of the 1930s, but many others seem wholly unaware (an observation based on visits in 2012). Ham’s continued pilgrimage into the 1950s means that older people do remember the processions; however, the stations of the cross and “apparition tunnel” are overgrown by brambles and not easy to see from the road. Staff at Etikhove’s community center can locate the house where the apparitions occurred, but they state that the site is on someone’s land and there is nothing to see now. They did helpfully pass on some local historical research into the apparitions by Dirk de Merlier. Olsene has a small memorial but its most popular shrine is a Lourdes grotto built in 1876 where there is no record of visions other than Lourdes. Melen’s 1933 chapel, built because of the apparitions, serves as a garden shed today. Naastveld’s apparition site is marked by a neglected statue in a small broken glass-fronted box.

It is left to historians to excavate the memories of the enthusiasm over the 1930s apparitions. De Merlier’s work at Etikhove is an example of local research. Meanwhile, Tine van Osselaer of Leuven University is undertaking funded research into the period of apparitions and the establishment of new shrines (1932-49). She has already published articles on the apparitions (2010, 2012) and a book is forthcoming.

### **Conclusion**

1930s Belgium illustrates the varied fates of Marian apparitions in the devotional life of popular Roman Catholicism. The explosion of interest in apparitions in 1933 has left its footprint in contrasting ways, categorized in three types. First, as at Beauraing and Banneux, apparitions gain approval, and a nascent shrine is supported, visited, and expanded to become an international place of pilgrimage. Second, apparitions fail to be recognized by the Church, but the persistence of the devotees, local and visiting, result in a maintained shrine, as at Onkerzele. Websites and pamphlets preserve the story and there may be tacit wide scale acceptance. Only if the Church bestows a good measure of support will the shrine grow to a reasonable size. This has happened at 1930s and 1940s sites of Marian apparitions in Germany (Maunder), but it has not yet been the case at Onkerzele, where devotion centers upon Léonie’s grave; the grotto and pre-existing chapel, which has been enlarged; and the

stations of the Seven Sorrows of Mary, which were rebuilt at various sites through the town. Third, the Church rejects the case, popular support dies out quickly, after a decade or two only a faint vestige remains or nothing at all, and the case is noted in lists but there is no live support. This has been the case for all the Belgian apparition sites of the 1930s with the exceptions of Beauraing, Banneux, and Onkerzele.

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